

“People, by their common experiences and struggles, can break sectarianism.”

Interview with the academic and activist Joseph Daher on his new book on the political economy of the Hezbollah, about sectarianism and protest movements in Western Asia and North Africa.

You have just written a book about Hezbollah. Why, in your opinion, was it necessary to reengage in this topic?

When I started in 2010, I thought it would be necessary to study Hezbollah and other Islamic fundamentalist movements because there many questions were still unanswered. You had different point of views regarding movements such as Hezbollah or the Muslim Brotherhood. Whether they were termed fascist, as conservative study centres would suggest, or as an Islamic brand of liberation theology as we witnessed in South America. I opposed both understandings. Another point of view I departed from: analysing it as a political party according to its political program, policies, and the social origin of its leadership and cadres. You cannot consider it progressive, but instead as a reactionary and sectarian political party, supporting a capitalist economy. It is a gradualistⁱ Islamic fundamentalist movement with an ideal of establishing an Islamic State. Although this is not possible under the current conditions in Lebanon.

This perspective on Hezbollah, though, was not present in my opinion: a holistic analysis, also looking at the political economy of Lebanon and the evolution of Hezbollah in relation to neoliberal policies that resulted in social differentiation in the population, also among Lebanese Shiites. Subsequently, Hezbollah’s ideology can’t be explained isolated from its political context and dynamics, whether being local, regional or international.

Finally, I wanted to bring forward thoughts of the Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amelⁱⁱ, especially from his book “In the sectarian state” regarding his analysis on issues of sectarianism, behaviour of the Islamic bourgeoisie during the civil war, and finally also the concept of “community class” and his criticism of it.

As you just mentioned, there are still some parts of the left which consider Hezbollah as being progressive. What’s your take on that?

Well, if it’s enough to struggle against Israel and to scream “Death to America!” in order to be considered progressive, we should even consider Al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden as progressives. That’s ridiculous. Imperialism is a system, it’s not limited to one or two countries in the West. It’s a global system in which the US today is still the main imperialist force. But you have other global imperialist forces such as Russia, China, France, Great Britain, etc. and regional powers like Israel, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt to some extend in the MENA region. Putting this aside, the analysis of political parties can’t be based solely on their foreign policies. The right to resist against a foreign occupier, against an authoritarian regime, must be supported. But that doesn’t mean that you support this political party ideologically and programmatically. You can’t put aside the women’s issue, the social issue, and other contradictions and discriminations in the society.

Regarding their politics, in your book you described Hezbollah as being neoliberal and charitable at the same time, how do these go together?

In various religious fundamentalist movements across the world there is this coalition between moral conservatism and neoliberalism. And if you think about it, it makes complete sense. When you have a strong state providing social services to large sections of the popular classes, a political party has less space to building a clientelist basis based on the provision of their own services. That's why they demand privatizations and other neo-liberal policies. Charity gives them a channel to transmit their ideology and build a mass popular basis. Because, if you want to receive certain services, most of the time you must follow the norms, laws and practices of the provider. That's exactly what Hezbollah is doing in Lebanon.

As you mentioned, there is a debate, whether you could define Islamist groups as fascist. In your book, as you just described, you would render them differently. You have mentioned Marvin Olasky, who has been a close advisor of George W. Bush, as being the "Western" and Christian counterpart of Hezbollah. Could you further elaborate on this?

I think we must be very careful with the term fascism. Fascism is a specific phenomenon in history that can repeat itself, obviously. But when you analyse fascism, it was, at first, a mass movement of the petty bourgeoisie that followed an important crisis. The main objective was taking over the state and crushing the labour movement. All of this within an imperialist state. Religious fundamentalist movements have not been created in this kind of processes at all. If you go back to history, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the 1920s to re-establish the caliphate in response to the end of the Ottoman Empire, British occupation, and the development of secular ideologies, ideas, and movements.

Besides, there are completely different dynamics. Fascist movements want to create the "new man". The religious fundamentalist movements, on the other hand, want to take people back to a 'Golden Period', that is the Islamic caliphate as it was at the time of the prophet Mohammed. This is not very similar.

In addition, you should be careful because often the term is simply used to criminalize an organisation and to imply that we can fight them just by outlawing them. An example would be some sections that came out of the Stalinist left that justified their alliance with authoritarian regimes in the fight against the "fascist" Muslim Brotherhood. The result was that the democratic space was shut down for everyone. The Islamic fundamentalist forces suffered a lot from the repression, but in the end the left as well. More recently we saw this with Egyptian President al-Sisi. Some sections of the left supported the Egyptian dictator against the Muslim Brotherhood and afterwards al-Sisi repressed everyone.

In addition, you had the bourgeoisification of what I call the 'gradualist' fundamentalist forces. Meaning, that you have an increasing number of capitalists playing a role in this organisation. So, there are a lot of differences between the two phenomena. And if you don't do the right analysis, you can't fight them. This also means that you should defend the right of everyone to organise, except the fascists. And it also means, we should defend the rights of the Muslim Brotherhood's members being imprisoned in Egypt today. We should demand the liberation of all political prisoners.

Lebanese politics are still very much shaped by sectarianismiii. Could you briefly describe what it means and what Hezbollah's position is on that?

The current Lebanese sectarian system has its origins in the middle of the 19th century. It was a consensus between the local elite and imperialist forces. Sectarianism is very important to be understood as a product of modern times, not as something that has always been in the region or that people from certain denominations are necessarily

affiliated with a certain party. Hezbollah's position towards the sectarian system has evolved over time. In the 80s, it was condemning it, saying it was Maronite^{iv} dominated. As a solution, they wanted to establish an Islamic state. This they uphold until today. But, they say, they won't impose it on the people, very well knowing that due to the demography of Lebanon it won't be possible without force. One third of the population is Christian, one third is Sunni, and one third is Shiite. And not all the Shiites want to live in an Islamic republic modelled on Iran.

So today their position is to say: *"Although there are mistakes, we support the sectarian system as it is. We should reform it, but don't be hasty!"* Every time we witnessed a popular movement from below challenging the sectarian system and its actors, Hezbollah was opposed to it. Hezbollah has actually become one of the main actors benefitting from and defending the sectarian system.

Why was it important for the left to fight the sectarian system and how has this relation looked like?

The sectarian representation makes it very difficult for any kind of leftist or progressive force. Do they want to participate in it? Every time there was a cross-sectarian movement from below, it was broken by the sectarian elite forces, because it posed a threat to them. The question today is rather, how do you behave being part of the system, how can you build a mass movement challenging the system? The Communist Party participates in elections. If they would have someone elected, that would be very good to challenge the sectarian system also from inside the parliament.

But you would also agree that the only way to overcome the sectarian system would be cross-sectarian movements from below?

Yes. And to give you an example, every time you had a movement from below, and the uprisings of 2011 were the best example, walls of fears were broken down due to common experiences. Do you remember the Tahrir Square in Cairo when Christians protected Muslims while praying and the other way around? In the beginning of the Syrian uprising you had people chanting "Alawis and Muslims, we are one, Christians and Muslims, we are one and Arabs and Kurds, we are one". People by their common experiences and struggles can break sectarianism, racism, and other oppressive ideas. But the weakening and repression of popular movements brought again forward sectarianism and oppressive ideas. That's why we need a large movement from below.

Why did the regimes, like Saudi-Arabia, Qatar, Iran and Syria, use sectarianism so much as a tool of counter-revolution? Because it is a very important weapon for breaking unity among the people and divert the popular classes away from socio-economic and democratic dynamics, while mobilising them on a reactionary basis that does not challenge their own power and influence.

In your book you also showed that there was a debate inside the Lebanese left regarding what you called 'Community Class'. The notion that there could be an oppressed or an oppressive denomination, whereby it would be sound for the left to engage in sectarian politics.

The concept of community class was born within an organisation called "Communist Action Organisation" equating a religious sect with a class, Christian Bourgeoisie, Sunni Middle Class and Shia popular classes. In a context where the bourgeoisie retained its power, by using sectarianism to subordinate the popular classes to its own interests, it was catastrophic. It only strengthened sectarian tensions. It doesn't matter if you're a Christian worker, you are a traitor because you belong to the bourgeoisie. If you don't break with the tools by which the bourgeoisie rules your society, but instead reinforce it, it's catastrophic. This ideology had a bit of influence, but nowadays no one would defend it anymore.

You just mentioned the 2011 movements. Also in the 2016's municipal elections in Lebanon a considerable amount of people didn't vote for the classical sectarian parties. For example, the Communist Party won a few towns in Hezbollah areas and in Iraq you have a large cross-sectarian and cross-ethnic anti-corruption movement. Would you say there's a new generation that doesn't want to engage in sectarian politics anymore?

I think, first, we shouldn't forget that we are living in very difficult times in this region. But as you said, the conditions that allowed for these movements are still present. This is where hope lies. And that the parties that came to dominate the political scene, whether being linked to the authoritarian regimes or Islamic fundamentalist forces, don't have answers to these questions, being social justice, democracy, emancipation and liberation of the people, because they are the two sides of the counter-revolution. So, what we saw in Lebanon with the movement "you stink!" and afterwards in the elections with an independent list in Beirut, "Beirut Medinati" is very interesting. In Iraq it was fantastic, a great movement and you still have smaller movements linked to it until today. Morocco today is witnessing huge popular movements, where again you have calls for social justice and democracy combined with a national issue. The Amazigh^v, who are still oppressed, are claiming their identity and their rights. So, things are not completely over, but we have to learn from our mistakes in order not to repeat them. We have to organise in different ways against the two sides of the counter-revolution to be able to present a true alternative to the people. But this means organising on a mass level, providing people a real alternative, not just a small one.

Joseph Daher is a Swiss-Syrian academic and political activist and founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever. He has just been to Berlin by the invitation of the RLS to talk about his new book "Hezbollah – The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God"^{vi}.

The interview was conducted by Noël van den Heuvel.

The views and opinions expressed are those of the interview partner and do not necessarily reflect policy or position of Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung.

ⁱ Gradualist denotes those Islamic fundamentalist movements who believe in gradual change in society towards an Islamic state. The term differentiates them from Jihadist movements, for example.

ⁱⁱ One of the most influential Arab communist thinkers, also called the "Arab Gramsci". He was killed 1987 by Islamic fundamentalists.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sectarianism denotes a system of power in which, other than in the classical civil state, the relationship towards the state is determined by religion or ethnicity. Every interaction with the state, like voting per example, is not executed as an individual but as a Christian, Sunnite, etc. The state is portraying itself as the preserver of a precarious equilibrium of power between different (religious, ethnic) groups. In Lebanon, for example, some official posts are reserved for representatives of a certain denomination.

^{iv} Maronites are a Christian denomination.

^v Non-Arab inhabitants of North African countries.

^{vi} Daher, Joseph; Hezbollah – The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God, Pluto Press, London, 2016.